

Increasing Public Safety, Reducing Bureaucracy: The JAG Program

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The President's budget for 2004 proposes creating a \$600 million grant program to provide assistance to states and local governments for a broad range of activities to prevent and control crime and improve the criminal justice system. This initiative, called the Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program, will replace the Edward Byrne Memorial Formula Grant Program and the Local Law Enforcement Block Grants (LLEBG) Program, both administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA).

BJA is committed to creating a new criminal justice grant program that maintains the current equitable division of funds between states and local recipients, but also gives states and local jurisdictions greater flexibility. JAG will have fewer purpose areas than the current Byrne formula program, but they will be broader, giving our grantees the freedom they need to respond quickly to pressing crime problems, including protecting America's communities from terrorist threats.

Under JAG, every initiative now funded through Byrne and LLEBG will continue to be eligible for funding. State Administering Agencies will receive the state portion of the JAG grant and administer these funds as they do now for Byrne formula funds and the state's LLEBG allotment. BJA will work closely with the states to strategically plan statewide public safety and violence prevention initiatives. States will also be required to continue to pass through part of their JAG grant to local jurisdictions, including rural areas.

Moreover, cities and counties who now receive funds directly from the LLEBG Program will continue to receive funds through JAG. JAG will continue to fund personnel, overtime, and equipment for local law enforcement—assistance that is vital to ensuring public safety in many communities. BJA will encourage local jurisdictions to work together by combining their funds in regional projects.

JAG will help us correct a serious problem in the Byrne and LLEBG programs—the lack of coordination between the states and local communities who receive these funds and implement criminal justice strategies. A single, closely coordinated funding mechanism will give us the ability to expand, without the duplication inherent in separate grant programs, the technical assistance in strategic collaborative planning that states and local entities tell us they want and need.

BJA staff are working very hard to explore a range of options to implement and administer the JAG Program. Our guiding principles are simple. We want to reduce paperwork and streamline the grant award process, take advantage of technology, and ensure that the system reports the accomplishments of our grantees. We also want to look closely at how we can simplify the reporting requirements to not only remove unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles to our grantees' work, but also to improve the quality and usefulness of what is reported.

Fortunately, we have an innovative, field-tested model to work with. The award-winning, paperless LLEBG system has revolutionized every stage of the grant-making process: application, approval, fund draw down, and reporting. BJA will build from this platform, making modifications to involve the states in a review and comment function in the grant approval process for the local portion that flows directly to city and county officials. In this way, states will be more informed about how localities intend to use their funds. In turn, this information will better inform state planning and spending.

When the JAG Program was announced, state and local criminal justice practitioners were concerned that the initiative would reduce the overall amount of funding available to them through Byrne and LLEBG. As a former administrator of state criminal justice funds, I understand this concern, and we at BJA will listen carefully to the input of state and local practitioners throughout this process. It is important to note, however, that whether Byrne and LLEBG continue or JAG is approved, the funding level would most likely be similar under either situation, as the funding levels are not related to the development of the new JAG Program but to the effort to shift resources to homeland security.

I believe JAG will open the door to more resources, not less. While the total Congress allocates for JAG may indeed be less than Congress has typically allocated for Byrne and LLEBG, JAG will produce more resources by eliminating the programs' redundancies and promoting collaboration and resource sharing between states and local communities and among communities regionally.

At BJA, the more we study how to merge Byrne and LLEBG, the more excited we get about JAG's potential for making our grantees' lives easier. In short, a merged program will give us the best of the two programs while removing overlapping bureaucratic requirements that are wasting resources we need to protect our nation from violent crime and terrorism.